

The Valley Voice

5 June 2010

Yosemite National Park

Climbing to the brink



Yosemite Valley is known for two things – waterfalls and granite walls.

Yosemite Falls is the signature example of the former, a three-stage drop of 2,425 feet. That's more than 14 times higher than Niagara Falls and, according to some sources, the tallest waterfall in North America.

Most of Yosemite National Park's visitors see the falls through car windows as they arrive on the valley floor. They walk to the base of the 318-foot lower falls on a flat, paved path to be soaked with cold spray blown by wind driven by tons of falling water.

One cannot stand in the jet-roar violence at the base of this torrent and fail to gain an acute appreciation of nature's power.

There's one way to get this view of the top of Yosemite Falls

Craig Bowers and I
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Climbing to the brink

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wanted to appreciate something different: the precipice from which Yosemite Creek flings itself into the void.

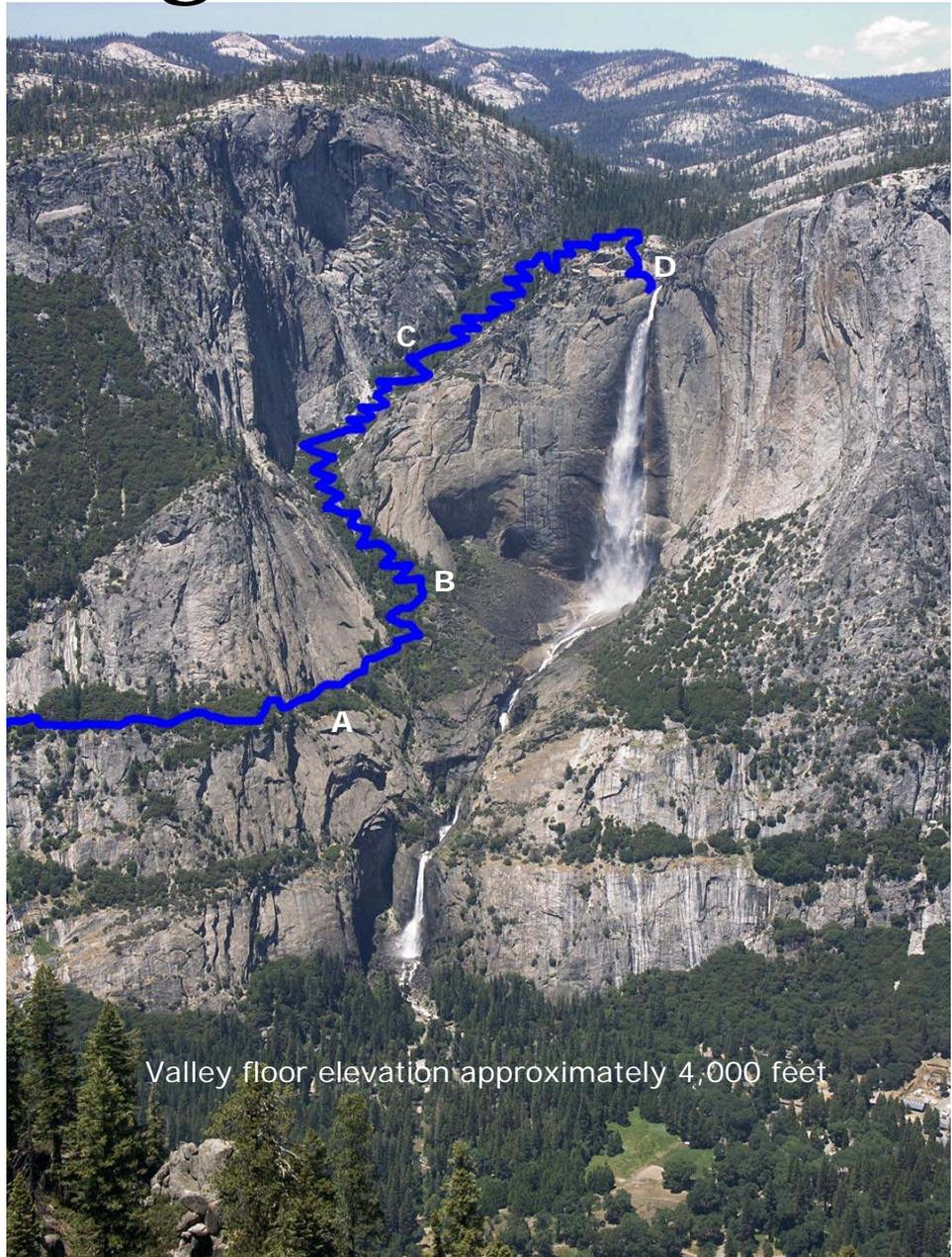
This was the year to do it, and Saturday was our day.

The Sierra got heavy snow last winter, meaning that all of Yosemite Valley's nine named waterfalls plus many others would be flowing full once the snowmelt began last month.

We spent Friday night at Yosemite Lodge at the base of the falls and were on the trail before 7 a.m. An early start was important so that we could ascend the upper portion of the 2,770-foot climb, which is unshaded and between heat-reflective bare granite walls, before the afternoon sun had a direct shot at us.

It would have been better if we'd eaten a bit of breakfast.

As I struggled up the 60 switchbacks that mark the initial 1,000-foot climb, I filed that fact among a
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Valley floor elevation approximately 4,000 feet

In this photo taken from the internet and shot from across the valley, our trail is marked by the blue line. By the time climbers enter this view from the left, they have already climbed about 1,000 feet in the course of a mile. As hikers follow the trail along a ledge and curve left around a granite buttress, the upper fall – a 1,430 foot drop – comes into view for the first at the point marked “A” on the photo. About a third of the way up between points “B” and “C,” the trail emerges from forest and is exposed to direct afternoon sun the rest of the way up. Other pictures in this newsletter may be referenced to one of labeled points in this illustration. The trail was built between 1873 and 1877 and is one of the oldest in the park.

Climbing to the brink



A telephoto shot of our goal from "A" on the illustration, previous page

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growing list of excuses for turning back that – with each new stop to wheeze or drink – was beginning to sound increasingly reasonable.

"It's just incredible to be here," said Craig, who was on his first climb like this. "If we end up having to go back from here, this has all been worth it."

He wasn't saying that because he was as tired as me. He's 10 years younger, fitter, not that many years since flying attack jets in the Marines ... geez, my list of excuses was pretty damn solid.

But I'd been in this shape on previous climbs, and I know the difference in the way I felt when I turned back and the times that I just kept poking along.



Craig at point "B" on the climb

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Climbing to the brink

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The key was that Craig was willing to poke along with me.

I'm that great a conversationalist.

"Gotta breathe."

"This is simply amazing being here, surrounded by this setting. Just being alive and in this place – this is what Saturdays were made for."

"Gotta breathe."

"I just don't think enough people appreciate what Yosemite is and how lucky we are to live four hours away."

"Gotta breathe."

Banter like that that kept my spirits up, and then we began to meet the first hikers coming down, burdened under heavy packs indicating they'd been on the trail a night or more.

Two European guys came down wearing socks with individual toes but no shoes.

"It's wet up there," one said. His socks were soaked.

Two American women had been in the high country four days and were using the falls trail as their return route to civilization. Snowshoes were strapped to the backs of their packs.

As we climbed higher, my rest stops became more frequent, sometimes every 20 or 30 yards. Craig's support took a different turn.



Me at point "C" with less than a mile and under 1,000 feet of climbing to go.

"We're going to the top," he said.

And we were. There was far more trail beneath us than above us. Neither of us was willing to surrender what we'd gained. And the reports we picked up from other climbers were consistent: "It's worth it."

It was.

Five hours and 3.4 miles after heading up the trail, we reached the top, turned back toward the cliff face, crested a rise in the bare granite and there it was.

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Climbing to the brink



Climber getting that once-in-a-lifetime photo

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Not the waterfall. Emptiness.

To get to the brink of the waterfall, we descended steps carved out of the granite to a small ledge where we could see Yosemite Creek plunge into the abyss.

It was wild. It was truly frightening. It was not OSHA-approved.

We spent an hour at the top gawking, eating some lunch and working out leg cramps. The descent took three more hours, which my feet did under protest.

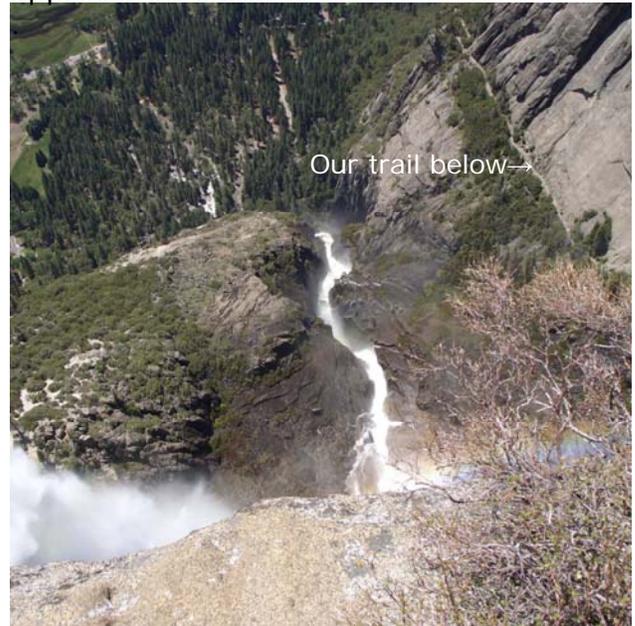
We were going down as the rush hour traffic was headed up – crazy people suffering from heat we had avoided, crazy people in flip-flops, crazy people with toddlers packed on their backs – crazy people.

We had packed more water than recommended and were able to give a bottle to a woman descending ahead of us. She had none to drink, but at every stream crossing she stopped to immerse her hands and arms in the cold water and pour it down her shirt. She was obviously in a bad way, and she and the guy with

her spoke only some eastern European language.

At the bottom, after Craig and I had relieved our feet of their hiking shoes, we went to the lodge cafeteria for cheeseburgers, and spotted her at a nearby table.

I know American hand gestures like “OK” and thumbs-up have far different meanings in other cultures, but she appreciated ours.



Looking down Yosemite Falls



Craig, Yosemite Creek and the Great Beyond



Craig and I at the overlook ledge at the top of Yosemite Falls.



Internet photos

Note the safety helmet

More than one way to the top

One of the great things about Yosemite National Park is that everybody – rock climbers, hikers and motorists – can see the valley from bottom up or top down.

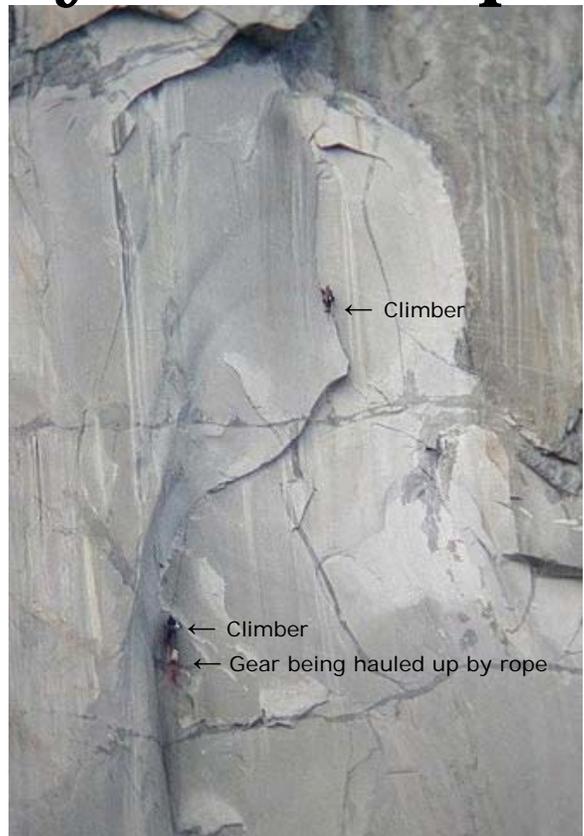
You can drive Grandma to Glacier Point and roll her wheelchair over to the edge so she can look 3,000 feet down into one of God's most beautiful holes in the ground. It's pretty much the same view as the picture above from the top of El Capitan.

But some places – El Capitan, the top of Half Dome or the brink of Yosemite Falls – can be reached only by those willing and able to work harder for the experience.

There are only three ways to watch Yosemite Creek begin its plummet. The easiest is a 16-mile hike across the high country from the Tioga Pass Road and back. You can walk up from the valley like Craig and I did, which is one of the most difficult hikes in the park. Either is an all-day trek.

Or you can find a crack in one of the valley's

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Rock climbers ascend the vertical face of El Capitan, Yosemite's tallest wall.

More than one way to the top

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walls big enough to jam your fingertips into and start crawling skyward.

For most wall climbs in Yosemite, you'll be looking at four days of climbing, hanging on by your fingers and toes, and three nights of sleeping on a "portledge." A portledge is a lightweight, collapsible sleeping platform suspended from a chock wedged tightly in a crack in the granite.

Most Yosemite visitors have no idea that humans scale these walls like a spider in the kitchen. And even those aware that Yosemite is rock climbing's Mecca rarely see them. Climbers are such tiny specks on the rock that unless you're looking at the right spot on the walls with a telephoto lens, they're nearly invisible.

Two Yosemite rock climbing videos for you:

1. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2c4kAcwvOgA&feature=related>
2. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gmm9RZe3Pmc&feature=related>



Internet photos

Roll over, Honey, you're snoring

